CHAPTER 1

Calvin as commentator on Genesis

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Calvin first published his commentary on Genesis in 1554, and published it again with revisions with his Harmony on the Last Four Books of Moses in 1563. The commentary continued Calvin's interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures that began with his Commentary on Isaiah of 1551, which was itself to be republished in a revised and enlarged edition in 1559.[1] Calvin likely began work on the commentary on Genesis in 1550, when he gave a two-year cycle of lectures on the book.[2] However, at the same time that Calvin was preparing the commentary on Genesis, he was also finishing his commentary on the epistles of the New Testament (1551), as well as the first part of the book of Acts (1552) and the Gospel of John (1553). In the same year that the Genesis commentary appeared Calvin also published the second part of his Acts commentary, and a year later he published his harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (1555), along with a completely revised edition of all the other New Testament commentaries. Thus the Genesis commentary is but one part of a massive publication effort of Calvin during this period, in which he sought to finish his interpretation of the New Testament (excluding 2 and 3 John and Revelation), and to begin his interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

Calvin was embroiled in several controversies during the preparation and production of the commentary on Genesis, all of which leave their mark on the commentary. The *Consensus Tigurinus* was published in 1551, and represented the agreement reached between Zurich and Geneva concerning the holy Supper of the Lord, which had badly divided the evangelical community. However, the publication of the *Consensus* led to a bitter polemic between Calvin and the Lutheran theologians in Germany. Joachim Westphal, a Lutheran minister in Hamburg, wrote against the

1 Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), pp. 100–106.
2 T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), p. 29.

Consensus Tigurinus in 1552 and 1553, and in 1554 Calvin wrote his first response to Westphal in his *Defense of the Sane and Orthodox Doctrine of the Sacraments*, which was published in January of 1555. Calvin dedicated the 1554 edition of the Genesis commentary to the three sons of John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, but the Lutheran theologians who were opposed to the *Consensus* convinced their rulers to refuse the dedication, noting Calvin's problematic views on the Supper, as well as his negative evaluation of Luther's interpretation of Genesis in his commentary. The controversy with Jerome Bolsec in 1551 over the eternal predestination and providence of God led Calvin to finish his response to Albertus Pighius in his treatise *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* of 1552, to which Calvin refers the reader in the Genesis commentary.[3] The trial and execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva in 1553 led to the publication in 1554 of Calvin's *Defense of the Orthodox Faith on the Trinity, against Prodigious Errors of Michael Servetus*, and Calvin makes direct reference to Servetus' position on the Trinity in his Genesis commentary.[4] Finally, the period between 1550 and 1554 saw a dramatic increase in the number of evangelical refugees coming to Geneva, many of whom left after having been cared for, while others stayed and even became citizens.[5] Calvin's awareness of the persecution of the small bands of evangelicals in France, and his own experience as a religious exile in Geneva, made him especially attuned to the picture of the small, afflicted, and exiled community of the fathers in Genesis. Thus, the controversies over the holy Supper of the Lord, the eternal election and providence of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the plight of the evangelical communities in France, all influenced Calvin's interpretation of Genesis.

THE AUTHORS OF GENESIS

Calvin thought that Moses wrote the book of Genesis, along with the four other books of the Pentateuch, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, while he was alone on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24:12–18; 31:18). "Hence we

3 *Comm. Gen.* 3:1, *CO* XXIII:56A; CTS 1:145.

4 "God, however, did not put forth his Word until he proceeded to originate light; because in the act of distinguishing his wisdom begins to be conspicuous. Which thing alone is sufficient to confute the blasphemy of Servetus. This impure caviler asserts, that the first beginning of the Word was when God commanded the light to be; as if the cause, truly, were not prior to its effect" (*Comm. Gen.* 1:3, *CO* XXIII:16C; CTS 1:74–75).

5 William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 121–143.

gather that he wrote his five books not only under the guidance of the Spirit of God, but as God himself had suggested them, speaking them out of his own mouth."[6] Calvin can therefore speak of two authors of Genesis: Moses and the Holy Spirit. "I return now to the design of Moses, or rather of the Holy Spirit, who has spoken by his mouth."[7] As is widely acknowledged, Calvin can at times speak of the Scriptures being dictated to its human authors by the Holy Spirit. "At the same time, histories were added to these, also the labor of the prophets, but composed under the Holy Spirit's dictation."[8]

However, Calvin often refers to a previous oral tradition, stretching from Adam to Moses, to account for the content of the book of Genesis. "What the patriarchs received they handed on to their descendants. For the Lord left it with them on this condition, that they should so propagate it."[9] Thus, when scoffers ask how Moses, who lived during the exodus, could have known anything about the creation of the world, Calvin responds by appealing to the oral tradition of the fathers. "For he does not transmit to memory things before unheard of, but for the first time consigns to writing facts which the fathers had delivered as from hand to hand, through a long succession of years, to their children."[10] Moses does not, therefore, reveal things by the dictation of the Spirit that would otherwise remain unknown, but rather places into writing the oral tradition of the fathers, so that it might be more accurately preserved.

> Therefore, we ought not to doubt that the creation of the world, as here described, was already known through the perpetual tradition of the fathers. Yet, since nothing is more easy than that the truth of God should be so corrupted by men, that, in a long succession of time, it should, as it were, degenerate from itself, it pleased the Lord to commit the history to writing, for the purpose of preserving its purity.[11]

Calvin is especially interested in vindicating the reliability of Moses as a historian over against the attacks of the "Lucianists" on his integrity and credibility. "Those Lucianist dogs, who carp at the doctrine of Moses, pretend that he was a vain man who wished to acquire for himself the command over the rude common people."[12] Calvin appeals to the way

6 *Comm. Exod.* 31:18, *CO* xxv:79C; CTS v:328.
7 *Comm. Gen. Argumentum*, *CO* xxiii:7–8; CTS 1:59.
8 *Inst.* iv.8.6, *OS* v.138.11–13; (11:1154).
9 *Inst.* iv.8.5, *OS* v.137.17–21; (11:1153).
10 *Comm. Gen. Argumentum*, *CO* xxiii:5–6; CTS 1:58.
11 *Comm. Gen. Argumentum*, *CO* xxiii:7–8; CTS 1:59.
12 *Comm. Gen.* 49:5, *CO* xxiii:594–595; CTS 11:446.

Moses dispossesses his own tribe of Levites of an inheritance of the land, as well as to the disgrace the Levites bring on themselves in his report of the slaughter of Shechem, to establish the reliability of Moses.[13] By acting against the interests of his tribe in his narrative, Moses shows that he is indeed an instrument of the Holy Spirit, according to Calvin. "We may perceive that, by censuring his whole tribe in the person of Levi, he acted not as a man, but as an angel speaking under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, and free from all carnal affection."[14]

Calvin also thinks that Satan had a hand in trying to convince people that Moses wrote fables, by having the poets invent stories that sound similar to the events narrated by Moses. For instance, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid appears to undermine the credibility of Moses' account of Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt.

> But under the pretext of this narrative, captious and perverse men ridicule Moses; for since this metamorphosis has no more appearance of truth, than those of which Ovid has feigned, they boast that it is undeserving of credit. But I rather suppose it to have happened through the artifice of Satan, that Ovid, by fabulously trifling, has indirectly thrown discredit on this most signal proof of Divine vengeance.[15]

Ovid also echoes Moses' account of the re-creation of the world after a deluge. "By the poets, Deucalion with his wife, is feigned to have sown the race of men after the deluge, by throwing stones behind him."[16] According to Calvin, Satan influenced the pagan poets in this way not only to undermine the authority of Moses, but also to obscure the oral tradition about the restoration of the world handed on by Noah. "For since the memory of the deluge, and the unwonted propagation of a new world, could not be speedily obliterated, he scattered abroad new clouds and smoke; introducing puerile conceits, in order that what had before been held for certain truth, might now be regarded as a fable."[17]

The fables of the poets, representing the attempts of Satan to undermine the truth of the oral tradition of the fathers, may therefore be seen as one of the reasons Moses committed this tradition to writing. "Many ages afterwards, seeing that the wicked forgetfulness of men had rendered them callous to the judgment and mercy of God, the door was opened

13 *Comm. Gen.* 34:25, *CO* XXIII:461C; CTS II:226.
14 *Comm. Gen.* 49:5, *CO* XXIII:594–595; CTS II:446.
15 *Comm. Gen.* 19:26, *CO* XXIII:278B; CTS I:513.
16 *Comm. Gen.* 14:1, *CO* XXIII:196–197; CTS I:381.
17 Ibid.

to the lies of Satan, by whose artifice it came to pass, that heathen poets scattered abroad futile and even noxious fables, by which the truth respecting God's works was adulterated."[18] However, Calvin also sees in the poets accurate reflections of the tradition of the fathers, as when both Horace and Moses teach that the disorders of the natural world are the fruits of sin.

> This has been celebrated in poetical fables, and was doubtless handed down, by tradition, from the fathers. Hence that passage in Horace: "When from heaven's fane the furtive hand / Of man the sacred fire withdrew, / A countless host – at God's command – / To earth of fierce diseases flew; / And death – till now kept far away – / Hastened his step to seize his prey."[19]

The tradition of the patriarchs is therefore known by the Gentiles, according to Calvin, though often in a corrupted form.

THE AUDIENCE FOR WHOM GENESIS WAS WRITTEN

Calvin understands Moses to be writing primarily for the Jews of his own day. "Whereas Moses was ordained the Teacher of the Israelites, there is no doubt that he had especial reference to them, in order that they might acknowledge themselves to be a people elected and chosen by God."[20] Hence, when Moses speaks of the location of the Garden of Eden, the reader must keep in mind that he is speaking to the Jews of his time. "Moreover, it is to be observed, that when he describes paradise as in the east, he speaks with reference to the Jews, for he directs his discourse to his own people."[21] According to Calvin, the capacities of the Israelites developed progressively over time, so that they began as young children and progressed to adolescence. At the time of the narrative of Genesis the Jews were at their most untrained and immature level, something that readers of Genesis need to keep in mind. "We have elsewhere said, that Moses, by a homely and uncultivated style, accommodates what he delivers to the capacity of the people; and for the best reason; for not only had he to instruct an untaught race of men, but the existing age of the Church was so puerile, that it was unable to receive any higher instruction."[22] Moses himself was not untrained or unlearned, for Calvin

18 *Comm. Gen.* 10:1, *CO* XXIII:157B; CTS 1:313.
19 *Comm. Gen.* 3:19, *CO* XXIII:75B; CTS 1:177.
20 *Comm. Gen. Argumentum*, *CO* XXIII:11–12; CTS 1:65.
21 *Comm. Gen.* 2:8, *CO* XXIII:36C; CTS 1:113.
22 *Comm. Gen.* 3:1, *CO* XXIII:53C; CTS 1:141.

insists that he had learned all the arts of the Egyptians. However, he did not write as a learned person, but, rather, accommodated himself to the capacities of his unlearned people. "I grant what they allege, that Moses, who had been educated in all the science of the Egyptians, was not ignorant of geometry; but . . . we know that Moses everywhere spoke in a homely style, to suit the capacity of his people, and that he purposely abstained from acute disputations, which might savor of the schools and of deeper learning."[23]

Calvin appeals to the accommodated style of Moses to reconcile the apparent conflict between the description of the world given in Genesis and that found in the writings of the learned philosophers. When Moses describes the waters as existing above the heavens (Gen. 1:6), he is not speaking with scientific precision, but is, rather, speaking according to the understanding of the world among the unlearned of his day. "He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere. Here the Spirit of God would teach all men without exception; and therefore what Gregory declares falsely and in vain respecting statues and pictures is truly applicable to the history of the creation, namely, that it is the book of the unlearned."[24] Astronomers also claim that the stars such as Saturn are actually larger than the moon, over against Moses' description of the moon as being the second largest heavenly body. "Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend."[25] By keeping this distinction in mind, the learned will not scoff at the unlearned style of Moses, nor will the unlearned condemn the labors of those who seek to study the world with more acuteness and precision. "For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known; it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God."[26]

Calvin is also concerned to adhere to the economy of divine self-manifestation that God used during the time of Genesis. Calvin thinks that the primary form of divine self-manifestation at this time was through dreams and visions, the contents of which were then to be handed on by oral tradition.[27] Calvin explicitly develops his understanding of this

23 *Comm. Gen.* 6:14, *CO* XXIII:123A; CTS 1:256.
24 *Comm. Gen.* 1:6, *CO* XXIII:18C; CTS 1:79–80.
25 *Comm. Gen.* 1:16, *CO* XXIII:22B; CTS 1:86.
26 *Comm. Gen.* 1:16, *CO* XXIII:22C; CTS 1:86–87.
27 *Comm. Gen.* 20:7, *CO* XXIII:289C; CTS 1:526.

economy of divine self-revelation in his commentary on Acts of 1552, in light of the passage of Joel quoted by Peter in his first sermon. "The sentence immediately following is to the same effect, 'Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.' These were the two means by which the Lord usually revealed himself to the prophets, as we learn from Numbers 12:6."[28] Calvin is acutely aware that Luther was highly suspicious of dreams and visions, given his criticism of "the heavenly prophets" such as Karlstadt and insistance that the Spirit never works within a person apart from the external preaching of the Word. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther often notes that when a revelation by dream or vision is mentioned, we are to understand that a prophet was actually sent to preach to the father in question. Calvin thinks that Luther's position does not do justice to the economy of divine self-manifestation peculiar to the time of the fathers. Thus, when Moses says that God spoke to Cain, Calvin notes:

> Moses does not state in what manner God spoke. Whether a vision was presented to him, or he heard an oracle from heaven, or was admonished by secret inspiration, he certainly felt himself bound by a divine judgment. To apply this to the person of Adam, as being the prophet and interpreter of God in censuring his son, is constrained and even frigid.[29]

Calvin expresses sympathy with Luther's desire to exalt the external ministry of the Word, but insists that the foundation of that ministry lies in the oracles delivered to the fathers in dreams and visions. "But we may observe, that the word of God was delivered from the beginning by oracles, in order that afterwards, when administered by the hands of men, it might receive the greater reverence."[30] The deliverance of oracles to the fathers in visions and dreams is as essential to the economy of divine self-manifestation at the time of the fathers as is the accommodation of Moses to the childish and unlearned capacity of the people. "They who have an aversion to this simplicity, must of necessity condemn the whole economy of God in governing the Church."[31]

28 *Comm. Acts* 2:17, *CO* XLVIII:33B; *CNTC* VI:58.
29 *Comm. Gen.* 4:6, *CO* XXIII:87C; CTS 1:198. "I believe that these words were spoken by Adam himself. Moses says that these words were spoken by the Lord, because Adam had now been accounted just and had been endowed with the Holy Spirit. What he now says in accordance with the Word of God and through the Holy Spirit is correctly declared to have been said by God" (WA XXXXII:194; *LW* 1:262).
30 Ibid.
31 *Comm. Gen.* 3:1, *CO* XXIII:53C; CTS 1:141.

THE LANGUAGE IN WHICH GENESIS WAS WRITTEN

Since Moses wrote for the Jews, he must have written in their own language, which is Hebrew. Calvin therefore insists that the teaching of Moses simply cannot be understood unless one is skilled in Hebrew.[32] However, he claims that the church of his day had inherited a Latin translation of the Greek Septuagint that had become severely corrupted over time, helped in large part by the ignorance of Hebrew during long stretches of the church's history. "I suspect also that this happened from the following cause, that those who had to deal with the Scripture were generally ignorant of the Hebrew language."[33] Calvin therefore makes common cause with Valla, Stapulensis, Erasmus, Reuchlin, Vatable, Budé, and Münster, in seeking to restore the genuine meaning of Scripture by returning to the original languages in which it was written, over against the Council of Trent, which held the Old Vulgate to be authoritative in all matters of doctrine and morals.[34] "In condemning all translations except the Vulgate, as the error is more gross, so the edict is more barbarous. The sacred oracles of God were delivered by Moses and the Prophets in Hebrew, and by the Apostles in Greek. That no corner of the world might be left destitute of so great a treasure, the gift of interpretation was added."[35] Calvin clearly assumes that the readers of his commentary are trained in Hebrew. When he points to an error in the Greek translation, he says, "However, as any one, moderately versed in the Hebrew language, will easily judge of their error, I will not pause to refute it."[36] When he defends his own rendering of the phrase, he again says, "They who are skilled in the Hebrew language know that there is nothing forced, or remote from the genuine signification of the word."[37]

If one is rightly to understand Moses, therefore, one must know the language in which he wrote, and must establish the most reliable version of the Hebrew text available. Calvin contrasts his method with the one he claims the Roman Church follows, by which it draws false doctrine from corrupt and inaccurate translations of Scripture. For instance, Calvin

32 Max Engemarre, "*Johannes Calvinus trium linguarum peritus*? La question de l'Hebreu," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 58 (1996): 35–60; Darryl Phillips, "An Inquiry into the Extent of the Abilities of John Calvin as a Hebraist" (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1998).
33 *Comm. Gen.* 46:8, *CO* XXIII:562A; CTS II:391.
34 Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1983).
35 *Acta Synodi Tridentinae cum Antidoto, CO* VII:414A; *T & T* III:71.
36 *Comm. Gen.* 4:7, *CO* XXIII:88B; CTS I:199.
37 *Comm. Gen.* 4:7, *CO* XXIII:89A; CTS I:200–201.

thinks that Rome falsely attributes to Mary what he clearly thinks is attributed to Christ, that he shall crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). "There has been none among them who would consult the Hebrew or Greek codices, or who would even compare the Latin copies with each other. Therefore, by a common error, this most corrupt reading has been received. Then, a profane exposition of it has been invented, by applying to the mother of Christ what is said concerning her seed."[38] By contrast, Calvin will consult the best Hebrew codices, as well as the Greek and Latin translations, in order to arrive at the genuine translation and interpretation of a passage. For instance, he appeals to the Hebrew codices to correct the translation of Genesis 3:17 given in the Vulgate. "The ancient interpreter has translated it, 'In thy work'; but the reading is to be retained, in which all the Hebrew copies agree, namely, the earth was cursed on account of Adam."[39]

Calvin often makes it sound as though he has done a prodigious amount of research into the proper rendering of a passage, by comparing for himself the various Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions. However, if we keep in mind the tremendous amount of writing Calvin was doing during the preparation of the commentary on Genesis, and his own acknowledgment that he often had little more than an hour to prepare for his lectures on Scripture, we will see that he must have been using the work of others to aid him in the task of interpretation.[40] Anthony Lane has carefully traced the various sources used by Calvin in the preparation of his Genesis commentary.[41] He made extensive use of the 1529 edition of the *Recognitio Veteris Testamenti ad Hebraicam Veritatem* by Augustinus Steuchus, the 1534–1535 edition of Münster's *Hebraica Biblia Latina*, and the Stephanus Bible of 1545, which included the Vulgate and Zurich translations as well as Vatable's notes. He also consulted two works by Fagius, his *Exegesis* and *Thargum*, from which he derived many of his references to Jewish exegesis. He also referred to Servetus' revisions of the Pagninus translation of Genesis, which was likely fresh in his mind after the trial of Servetus in 1553, and may have used Pagninus' *Thesaurus linguae sanctae*.[42] Finally, Calvin refers explicitly to Jerome's *Hebraicae*

38 *Comm. Gen.* 3:15, *CO* XXIII:71A; CTS 1:170.
39 *Comm. Gen.* 3:17, *CO* XXIII:72C; CTS 1:173.
40 Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, p. 21.
41 See also H. F. van Rooy, "Calvin's Genesis Commentary – Which Bible Text Did He Use?" in *Our Reformational Tradition. A Rich Heritage and Lasting Vocation*, ed. B. J. van der Walt (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1984), pp. 203–216.
42 Max Engemarre concurs with this description of the sources used by Calvin, though he observes that the references to Steuchus could come from Münster, who makes constant reference to his

questiones in Genesim, and to the Vulgate translation of the Septuagint, which he refers to as "the old interpreter." Even though he refers to the Septuagint, which he calls "the Greek interpreters," he does not appear to have consulted it himself.[43]

Calvin thought that knowledge of the Hebrew way of speaking could correct the misunderstanding of different passages presented by those who did not know Hebrew. For instance, when Moses says that humans were created in the image and likeness of God, Calvin does not think that this is meant to distinguish between image and likeness, as many in the Christian tradition have claimed, but was, rather, a form of explanatory repetition that is common in Hebrew. "We know that it was customary with the Hebrews to repeat the same thing in different words. Besides, the phrase itself shows that the second term was added for the sake of explanation."[44] When Moses says that Noah found grace in the eyes of God, he again describes this as a Hebrew form of speaking that does not imply merit, over against the interpretation of Roman theologians. "This is a Hebrew phrase, which signifies that God was propitious to him and favored him. For so the Hebrews are accustomed to speak . . . Which phrase requires to be noticed, because certain unlearned men infer with great subtlety, that if men find grace in God's sight, it is because they seek it by their own industry and merits."[45] Thus attention to the Hebraic form of speaking can keep the interpreter from drawing false conclusions about the meaning of a given passage.

THE ARGUMENT OR SUBJECT MATTER OF GENESIS

Given the fact that Moses wrote in Hebrew for his own people, in a homely style accommodated to their unlearned capacities, the most important question to ask is, what did Moses have in mind when he wrote Genesis? What was it that he meant to communicate to his people? Calvin shared with others of his day the view that every author has a goal or target (*scopus*) toward which they steadily aim in a given text. Before one can interpret any chapter or verse of a book, one must first discover the goal the author had in mind in writing the entire book. Calvin sets

work. Jean Calvin, *Sermons sur la Genèse, Chapitres 1:1–11:4*, ed. Max Engemarre (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), p. lii.

43 Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 205–259.

44 *Comm. Gen.* 1:26, *CO* XXIII:26B; CTS 1:94.

45 *Comm. Gen.* 6:8, *CO* XXIII:119B; CTS 1:250–251.